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ABSTRACT

Although modern readers often find the interpretation of medieval literature difficult, they should be encouraged to use their imagination to resolve the dilemmas they encounter. Often, these are the same issues with which medieval audiences had to wrestle and which the poets intended to raise. W. Iser's and H. R. Jauss's principles of audience-response criticism can be useful to the elementary study of medieval literature. Three Middle English genres--personification-allegories, Breton lais, and popular ballads--not only invite but also depend on audience-response, as do all primarily oral recitations. When reading short anthologies, beginning students need to understand the conventions of the dream vision, the humble but unreliable narrator, literary debate, and personification itself. In Breton lais (concise, narrative poems), the characters usually combine acceptable idealism with highly unconventional behavior and lead the audience to consider the story's underlying ethical issues. In popular ballads, the most accessible genre, questions are deliberately left unresolved to spur the audience's imagination. (References and specific examples are included.) (JD)

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Renewing Audience Response in Study of Medieval Literature

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Renewing Audience Response in Study of Medieval Literature

In studies of early literature, it is understandable that students feel restricted in how they react to statements by the poets directed to audiences living from 500-1100 years ago. One might guess that occasionally the differences in intellectual and cultural background, values, and expectations, to say nothing of language, seem much greater than the similarities. For example, the pervasive reminders in Everyman, that one's greatest responsibility lies in preparing one's soul for the afterlife, and the assumption in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight that even a hasty oral promise necessitates commitments that can cost one his life, are commonplaces of an earlier age which are not so easily recognizable in modern life.

One student memorizes the rationale for principles undergirding the sacrament of religious confession, but at the same time he is puzzled seeing Chaucer's Friar perverting those intended values. Another inexperienced reader reviewing the pleasantly quaint notions of "the little people" in her understanding of fairy lore, must then ponder the exploitative behavior of the Fairy King in Sir Orfeo or of the Queen of Elfland in the ballad of Thomas Rhymer. Such students must feel that there is more mystery than familiarity in medieval literature; the temptation may be strong to play it safe, to copy down lecture notes, and to wait and see: Why not let the teacher give the right explanation for such surprising and unconventional behavior?

What we must remind students is that at many key points they need to discover the right explanation themselves, just as earlier audiences did in the 14th and 15th centuries. Imaginatively written works appeal to our imagination because they challenge us; they ask us to draw inferences, to fill in gaps, to recognize discrepancies, and to reconstruct possible relationships in ways that differ from normal expectations.

A teacher, with what we might think of as minimal historical and linguistic knowledge, can unwittingly overwhelm the beginning students with attention to Middle English pronunciation and sound changes, the history of religious practices, 14th century economics, folklore, astrology, heraldry, chivalry, courtly love, presumed rules for metrical scansion and alliteration, and 15-20 other essential basics for medieval study. But somewhere in the midst of studying any literary work, we need to tell ourselves to quit reconstructing the whole of medieval life; we need to challenge our students to form judgments and to make something of what they are reading, partly in their own terms. They need to resolve indeterminacy on their own; they need to size up a character's options, the code of values he has revealed so far, and either predict what he ought to do or evaluate that character's behavior. They need to form a kind of partnership with the poet. This means searching for the values of an earlier age to see how closely they parallel the values students live by in their own contemporary lives.

The principles of audience-response criticism, especially as defined by the two German scholars, Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, with careful selection and simplification, are useful for elementary study of medieval literature. In many respects, audience-response criticism is much the same as problem-solving. One needs first to recognize a problem, something that seems curious, gives us pause, seems out of harmony, irritating, perhaps even immoral, so that for our peace of mind, we want to resolve it. We generally enjoy solving the problems that we discovered ourselves. Audience-response criticism presumes that the best authors shape their works with unresolved questions deliberately in the narrative, as gaps or omissions. Sometimes the poet explicitly asks us to answer a question he leaves unresolved. We should encourage students to propose hypotheses on the basis of their readings to answer such questions, and to test out such hypotheses on the basis of a more careful and thorough rereading.

Three of the most useful Middle English genres for encouraging audience response are personification-allegories, Breton lais, and popular ballads. All three genres are reasonably short and manageable. There aren't so very many pure examples of either of these first two literary types, but splendid instances of each turn up regularly in anthologies; and, as is always possible when dealing with medieval narratives, generic distinctions need not be insisted upon very strongly. All three of these genres--at least the shorter personification-allegories, and the so-called Breton lais, as well as the popular ballads--on the basis of manuscript history must have been presented primarily as oral recitations. The ballads of course were sung. When a work is read aloud to a group, rather than read privately by an individual, one can assume a group response or a comparison of responses. In fact, the forms for each of these generic narratives seem not only to invite but practically to depend upon audience response. In what follows, I will suggest questions turning up frequently in such study which may in fact be comparable to questions for the original audiences which depend upon the listeners' responses for appreciation of each type of narrative.

Quite a few anthologies of Middle English include Winner and Waster and The Parliament of the Three Ages. Of course, Piers Plowman is the dominant work in the genre. For beginning students, however, the two shorter allegories are easier to work with. One needs to explain the conventions of the dream vision, of the humble, unreliable narrator, of the literary debate, and of the personification itself, as forms of artifice that need getting used to, of course. But these connections also need to be looked at for their indeterminacy. The reader, or more probably the listener, should be encouraged to recognize the presumed (perhaps pretended) innocence of someone relating a dream, and the narrator's admitted inadequacy in accounting for the meaning of such a dream while in the presence of an audience of his social superiors. Each of us should also note that literary debaters are usually impossibly one-sided, so much so that almost any observer could discover much more

intelligently qualified interpretation of the issues argued about than either debater. Perhaps most importantly, one needs to recognize the many sides of a personification, that even the most abstract concepts--like Meed, Waster, and Elde(not to mention Death in Everyman)-- have surprising sides to them.

In preliminary examination of the poem Winner and Waster, students will recognize that the personification Winner seems to live up to his name. He favors good hard work and thrift as virtues that enable success. We can see that Winner enjoys the massive support of all the leaders of Western Europe, the Pope, all the religious orders, and the merchants against a disreputable opponent, Waster, whose total forces can be summed up most briefly:

. . . sadde men of armes

Bolde sqwyeres of blode, Bowemen many.

But when the apparent villain, Waster, points out for us the lack of charity in constantly striving for gain, Winner's supposedly unchallengeable ideals look much less admirable. We should ask students about this conflict by encouraging critical reading and by directing students to recognize that the most obvious economic solutions are not as satisfying as one might have thought. We can lead our modern readers in the classroom into an intellectual environment not very different from the oral presentation by the minstrel to an audience of knights and land-owners in the year 1350. Economic and social problems of the fourteenth century are a lot like ours. When we identify our own contemporary symbols of financial success, we should point out that such persons need to be measured something like personifications. A Middle English personification, in many respects, is like a person controlled by an obsession. Winner strives to finish ahead of everyone else, and probably at the expense of those weaker than he.

The character Elde in the Parliament of the Three Ages speaks against the worldly values of Youth and Middle Elde--chasing girls, buying more land and livestock--but probably because he is too feeble to enjoy the pleasures of younger men. He denounces the licentious folly of Youth and the selfish striving for goods of

Middle Elde. But his lecturing on how we should have contempt for worldly values ought to provoke critical response. His great concern for reputation as shown by his lectures on the Nine Worthies and other famous persons conflicts with the ideal of Contemptus Mundi.

The Breton lai as a literary genre seems to have caught on with the English poets and minstrels in the early 14th century. The earlier 12th century poet, Marie de France, looks like the most influential force. It is hard to say, however, whether any of the English poets writing in this style, including the authors of Middle English works like Sir Launfal and the Lai de Fresne, obviously derived from Marie's lais, even knew her name. But the author of Sir Orfeo described his narrative as a Breton lai and alluded to it as coming from an especially rich genre. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is referred to in passing as a lay. Chaucer's Franklin Tale is obviously so identified; and one might judge the Wife of Bath's Tale as having similar features. It isn't important to identify all the lais. What is important is recognizing their appeal for audience-response.

It seems as though the word lai arouses expectations, as though the audience needs to be especially alert and imaginative. When reading a lai we typically feel asked to interpret and evaluate the unconventional behavior of well meaning, sympathetic characters. These characters get in trouble, are misunderstood, or embarrassed. The trouble may be magic or characters from fairy land. There often is a love story, but the lovers face barriers or are illmatched or are severely tested (In a strict sense Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is not a love story). In any case, the character's loyalty, patience, tolerance, generosity, imagination, sensitivity, or other ideals are tested to the limit. In a Breton lai, we generally see characters passing the test of their integrity, though this sometimes leads to tragedy or disgrace. We can hardly avoid assuming a character in a Breton lai has worthy motives for doing what most of society disapproves of.

Among the poems mentioned so far, the hero in Sir Orfeo provokes a number of questions in readers' minds: Why does he go off in exile after Heurodis was taken away: What is the meaning of the visions in the Forest? Why cannot he and Heurodis speak together when they finally meet again? What is meant by the folk within the wall of the Fairy King's castle that seemed dead but were not? Why did the poet introduce the test of the Steward's loyalty ? The gaps in the narrative invite such questions as these and more. The answers such questions provoke among readers whose responses I know are primarily moral, ethical lessons. The poet's early representation of the hero as a devoted lover, a generous lord, a musician, and a patron encourages the expectation of idealistic behavior.

Similarly in Chaucer's later Franklin's Tale, the initial emphasis on Dorigen and Arveragus' marriage contract prepares us for the subsequent self-sacrificing. The behavior of Aurelius needs explaining in terms of courtly love conventions; but the narrator's concluding question--"Which was the moste free, as thinketh you?" --is useful to provoke closer examination of the motives, the feelings, the desires, and the sacrifices of each major figure. Even freshman students, for whom Middle English causes great difficulty, will struggle to find an answer that fits most closely with their own ethical values.

The characters in the lais, for the most part, combine the most acceptably wholesome idealism with highly unconventional behavior. Somehow the poets invite us to look for ethical lessons, and usually we can find them.

Surely the most accessible genre, the popular ballads are praised for their conciseness. The laconic narrators are thought to have reduced their stories to the barest minimum. We are told that no more is said than an alert, imaginative audience needs. One can infer what is appropriately left unsaid. Yet what is left unsaid often requires the most imaginative filling in or reconstruction. The implications are hardly ever commonplaces; rather they call forth the most unorthodox or unofficial knowledge. If in Barbara Allan, for

example, we ask why Sir John, at the drinking party, should have "slighted Barbara Allan," it seems fair to speculate that theirs was not a respectable romance; perhaps he was ashamed of the lower class woman that he loved. If we ask--How could Barbara Allan have caused Sir John's death?--we might wonder whether she poisoned him or cursed him through witchcraft. The answer is not obvious. There is much indeterminacy. But we want an answer appropriately fitting the details given us so far.

In most annotated texts for The Wife of Usher's Well, we have notes telling us that the three sons must have come back from the dead, for "their hats were o' the birk." We also learn that they behave in accordance with ghost lore when they say--"Tis time we were away"--once they hear the first cock crow. We learn more of their current place of residence as one son says:

> The channerin' worm doth chide:
> Gin we be missed out o' our place,
> A sair pain we mought bide.

But, for all that, there is much left to our imagination. It may not be important, our not knowing how the three sons died. We should wonder, however, about the imagined circumstances, or what sort of responsible divinity responds to the mother's wish and enables her to see the "three stout and stalwart sons" again. We might speculate also--assuming it to be a dream or a ghost vision--how the servant maidens fit into the vision. But most important, we can hardly avoid asking about the purpose of such a narrative: Is it to renew a scene of family love and warmth? to remind us of the terrors of death? to underline the sorrows of a bereaved family? We have choices. Which is the best?

The ballad of Thomas Rhymer draws, of course, from fairy lore, probably the least definite knowledge of all. Fairy legend may even be thought of as accounting for the most unaccountable phenomena in otherwise tolerable existences. As we review the engaging narrative of Thomas Rhymer, we should note what traits of

character by implication the story teller grants to both the fairy queen and Thomas. Perhaps one could say that the fairy lady in two key passages represents her way of life as boldly in contrast, in competition, with the lessons of Christianity. When Thomas incorrectly identifies her:

All hail thou mighty Queen of Heaven
For thy peer in earth I never did see,

she answers:

That name does not belong to me;
I am but the Queen of fair Elfland,
That am hither come to visit thee.

She seems to concede that her powers are more limited; but they are great powers just the same. And she wants Thomas to acknowledge her power.

In a later passage, where she points out the choice of roads, note how she emphasizes contradictions of values between traditional teaching and human desires:

O see ye not yon narrow road,
So thick beset with thorns and briars?
This is the path of righteousness,
Though after it but few inquires.

And see ye not that braid, braid road
That lies across that lily leven?
That is the path of wickedness,
Though some call it the road to heaven.

We might imagine an audience of earlier times responding as ambivalently as we to the conflict of values in human conduct. The poem encourages us to compare our responses; or it helps us recognize that the poet is aware of as many doubts as we may have.

Especially interesting in this ballad is Thomas Rhymer's responding to the Queen of Elfland's warnings. When she says:

And if ye dare to kiss my lips,

Sure of your body I will be.

He kisses her promptly and "all underneath the Eildon Tree." Boldly he says: "That weird shall never daunten me." He willingly takes that risk. But then again, near the end of the ballad, when she offers him the magic apple:

Takes this for thy wages, true Thomas,

It will give thee tongue that never can lee.

He refuses to be so controlled, even in an ostensibly moral sense, responding:

"My tongue is my ain!"

I like to see students accepting challenges and responding, perhaps even with true Thomas's spirit. Sometimes the response is to justify or rationalize the moral symbolism of what might at first seem like sheer fantasy. In the Wife of Bath's Tale, the old hag becomes young and beautiful. Why do we tolerate this magical transformation? Thomas Rhymer takes his chances with the Queen of Elfland and disappears for seven years. Is there anything that we can identify with in his choice? Everyman wants Fellowship, Kindred, Goods, and Beauty to accompany him to the grave. Can we imagine having similar desires? The three sons appear as ghosts to the Wife of Usher's Well, but must leave again before the cock crows twice. Why do they come and why are these ghosts welcomed? In the older literature, it often seems as though the more fantastic the episode, the more we sense and sympathize with the human predicament. We feel invited more urgently to respond, to try to recognize the implicit lesson in human relationships, feelings, desires.

What is the proper response in the better literature is never easy to say. As one gains more knowledge in social and cultural history, one may be able to

say more confidently what were the more acceptable,contemporary social standards. But many of the greatest works imply rebellious, nonconformist tendencies. Or they express desires or longings(especially in love) that are impermissible even by the rules of the time.

The remarkable quality in the most enduring literature is that one does not exhaust its indeterminacy in spite of a mass of carefully thought out, carefully documented interpretations. Each solidly based explanation seems wonderfully instructive and welcome. But it does not exhaust the poem. Rather it somehow stimulates new inquiry, new explorations. If one can answer why the old hag becomes young and beautiful in The Wife of Bath's Tale then someone else will ask, Why did she rescue the Knight-rapist in the first place? Or why would the Queen of Elfland even want Thomas Rhymer? Or why did Death give Everyman the chance to consult all his acquaintances? Or how could the maidens of the Wife of Usher's Well participate in the vision of her three sons returning temporarily as ghosts? It seems as though the critic who finds a question that no one has answered satisfactorily before, besides finding the question, finds herself caught up in the act of creativity. Such a person becomes something of a poet herself and recreates the poem with her own analysis. The success of this recreation depends upon its plausibility, its consistency within the structure of the poem itself, and the quality of ethical, religious, or emotional interpretation this analysis leads to.

One must readily concede that the average undergraduate student cannot digest as confidently the complex of historical assumptions or generic expectations of our hypothetical critic. But we should never underestimate our students' curiosity, or their willingness to respond to reasonable challenges, especially to their imagination. And they are intrigued by unconventional values and behavior. Iser's definition of indeterminacy and Jauss's more flexible approach to generic distinctions are useful principles for entangling our younger readers in literary interpretation. A few positive, creative reading experiences can do much to broaden the horizon of their literary expectations.

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